

Bomb mishap fails to close range at Gap

BY TOM BOWMAN
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LEBANON • Military officials have not determined why a fighter jet last week dropped a nonexplosive practice bomb near a hiker who was walking along a trail north of Fort Indiantown Gap.

Officials say the Gap's bombing range will stay open for jets to practice bombing even though the cause has not been found.

In August 2003, Gap officials closed a machine gun range after Sgt. Rudolph B. Flaim of Jerome, near Johnstown, was killed when a machine gun misfired, killing him.

"This was mechanical failure and the death of Rudy Flaim was human error, failure to follow procedures," said Gap spokesman Lt. Col. Chris

BOMB: Mishap's cause unsolved, but Gap range still open

Cleaver who said the Gap would not call off flights over the range in a safety stand-down. In the case of Flaim "all roads led to leadership with that issue."

Cleaver said the military has concluded the latest accident, one they call "a hung bomb," was not a systemwide failure.

"It's going to be a malfunction of a piece of equipment on the aircraft," Cleaver said. "So, no, it wouldn't mandate some type of safety stand-down. If the pilot failed to follow procedures, if it was pilot error, some kind of lack of training, that would dictate a stand-down."

In 1997, Gap officials closed the Gap tank range when tank rounds skipped over the mountain and fell near the same hiking trail. That range remains closed today.

"You are mixing ballistics with aerial bombardment," Cleaver said, explaining why the bombing range will not be closed.

"The air-to-ground range, these are national treasures. It helps maintain Fort Indiantown Gap and our viability," Cleaver said.

There are 15 bombing ranges in the country with the closest one other than the Gap in New Jersey.

In the Oct. 13 accident, an A-10 Thunderbolt jet fighter accidentally dropped a 25-pound cast-iron practice bomb on a hiking trail, over a mile north of the target, prompting military officials to ground the plane while they investigate.

No one was injured in the accident, Cleaver said, but the nonexplosive bomb, often called a dummy bomb, fell near a hiker who reported it to the state Game Commission.

The jet was flying at about 300 mph at 10,000 feet when the pilot dropped the bomb, Cleaver said.

"The safety officer feels the bomb was hung for about two seconds in the beginning of a turn," Cleaver said. "But they're still looking at that."

Cleaver said he is not sure when officials will rule on the cause of the accident but it could come in the next two weeks.

"I would hope sooner than that but once again they have to go thorough a deliberative process," Cleaver said. "But the important thing for them is to find out what happened, not to rush through it."

Cleaver said if a bomb gets stuck inside an aircraft, the pilot will try to fly to his home base, in this case, Willow Grove.

When an engine fails on a jet dropping bombs at the Gap, the pilot tries to fly to Harrisburg International Airport, Cleaver said. The runway at the Gap is too short for a jet to land there.

"We've had engine failures, in-flight emergencies. You go directly to HIA," Cleaver said. "We had a near-dead stick [with the engine stopped] a number of years ago on an F-16 and he made it down to HIA."

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